SCHOOL COMPLETION AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: INFORMATION AND STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

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High motivation and engagement in learning have consistently been linked to reduced dropout rates and increased levels of school success. Yet, year after year teachers and parents struggle to keep students engaged in school and motivated to succeed. Numerous studies have revealed that student engagement in school declines significantly for many students as they progress through school. By the time students reach middle school, lack of interest in school work becomes evident in more and more students, and by high school some students have become so disengaged from educational values and pursuits that they leave school. Therefore, it is critical that both parents and educators reach out to children who are disengaged from school and consequently unlikely to succeed.

Defining Student Engagement

The definition of student engagement usually includes participation in school activities and the student's identification with school and acceptance of school values. *Participation* includes basic behaviors such as the student's compliance with school and class rules, promptness in arriving at school and classes, attending to the teacher, and classroom participation. Identification encompasses a student's sense of belonging, social ties and bonds, relationship with teachers, sense of safety and security at school, and the extent to which the student values school success. It is important to recognize the four facets of engagement:

- *Academic:* The amount of time a student spends on task and the number of credits earned
- *Cognitive:* When a student focuses on and thinks about academic tasks, processing information, and self-directed learning
- *Behavioral:* A student's participation in classroom and extracurricular activities
- *Psychological:* A student' sense of identification with school, sense of membership at the school, and positive relationships with peers

Engagement and the School Dropout Process

Participation. There is growing evidence that school dropout is not so much an isolated *event* as a *process* of disengagement from school that often begins in elementary school. Research suggests that participation in school (attending school, attending classes, completing school work, participating in extracurricular activities) leads to positive school performance. Students who attend school regularly and complete their assigned school work are more likely to pass their classes. A positive school experience leads to positive identification with school. Students feel they belong in school, and they share common values with other students and teachers. By contrast, students who are at risk of dropping out are students who are showing signs of disengaging from school. They often express disinterest in school and have low expectations for completing school. They may be missing classes, not completing school work, getting bad grades, or getting suspended.

Retention. Students who have been retained are particularly at risk for dropping out. Research constantly indicates that multiple retentions are highly predictive of dropping out. Grade retention, regardless of when it occurs, may increase the chances of dropping out because it makes a student over age for grade during adolescence, and, for those who are already having difficulty in school, it may increase the likelihood that they will become discouraged and disengaged.

The Critical Role of Parents

Parents are the front line in establishing a child's attitudes about school and achievement in school. The more families support their child's learning and educational progress, the more the child tends to continue schooling. Family support and involvement may include providing study aids, setting high educational expectations, and regular parental monitoring and participation. Parents influence their child's commitment to school by providing both academic and motivational support for learning.

Academic support. This refers broadly to the ways in which parents foster their child's intellectual or cognitive development. Examples include helping with homework and helping children learn how to prepare for tests. Research has shown that when children are involved in intellectual activities at home, their perceptions of their academic competence improve. School and home are brought closer for the child and make these activities feel more achievable. It follows that children who have this experience at home may feel better able to master activities in school.

Motivational support. Interestingly, many studies have shown that *motivational support* for learning, in which parents promote the development of attitudes and approaches that are essential for school success, is also important in facilitating academic achievement, perhaps more so than direct assistance and monitoring of homework. Motivation is fundamental to achievement. Each child arrives at school with his or her own set of intellectual abilities and talents. The child needs to understand that learning sometimes requires persistence, that challenging tasks are more rewarding than easy ones, and that small accomplishments today are the basis for larger successes in the future. Children disengage from education when they fail to make the connections between academic achievement and future success.

Guidelines for Promoting Student Engagement

Parents' support for their child's school performance and involvement can take different forms. The nature of this support will vary from family to family:

Modeling the importance of learning, self-discipline, and hard work. Your child learns from your behaviors and attitudes. You can enhance your child's engagement and success in school by demonstrating a commitment to learning and hard work.

- Set long-term goals for yourself, and measure your progress toward those goals.
- Model persistence and demonstrate that hard work leads to success.

- Demonstrate respect for authority. Support teacher assignments, school standards, and standards of behavior.
- Show your interest and enthusiasm for learning.
- When solving a problem, think out loud so your child learns how to solve problems by watching you.

Setting and enforcing high but realistic expectations. Your child is more likely to achieve and succeed when you and your child's teachers have high expectations.

- Clearly state and discuss your expectations for school work and behavior.
- Work with your child's teachers to provide consistent messages about expectations for school work, attendance, and discipline.
- Be sure your expectations and goals are appropriate for your child's age and maturity.
- Emphasize both effort and results. Talking about working hard, not about being smart, is more likely to encourage persistence when work is challenging.
- Discuss the importance of a good education and the relevance of today's school performance to achieving tomorrow's goals.

Providing structure and monitoring. A consistent pattern of age-appropriate monitoring and supervision can increase your child's chances for success in school.

- Establish daily routines for studying and homework, bedtime, and meals.
- Monitor out-of-school activities, and set limits on TV watching. Arrange for after-school care that will encourage good study habits.
- Hold your child accountable for chores, behavior, and school work completion. Be sure there are appropriate, logical consequences for lack of performance.
- Make sure your child attends school each day.
- Be aware of how your child is doing in school.

Knowing what is going on at school. If you stay abreast of what is going on at school you can have a positive impact on your child's attitudes and behaviors toward school.

- Show interest in your child's progress at school.
- Recognize your child's efforts and progress. Give a high five for a 10-point improvement on a test.
- Help your child set long-term goals for future educational pursuits. Teach your child that achieving long-term goals may require some sacrifices.

- Make sure your child is able to get assistance with school work when needed.

Making your home a learning environment. A supportive and stable home environment has a positive impact on school performance and the degree to which your child is engaged in school and learning.

- Make education the family's top priority by giving preference to school work, reading, and other educative activities over TV and other recreation.
- Create a quiet place at home to study and to do homework with appropriate books, reference materials, and other learning materials at hand.
- Spend time discussing current events and school-related topics.
- Encourage and model leisure reading.

Being persistent and consistent. For education to remain a priority for your child, be both persistent and consistent when providing support for your child's learning.

- Consistently reinforce that education is important for your child's future.
- Remain focused on your child's educational progress regardless of whether your child is doing well or in jeopardy of disengaging from school completely.
- Do not allow your child to be distracted from the importance of school and learning.
- Work with teachers, school psychologists, and other school staff to maintain a focus on your child's progress.

Resources

Bempechat, J. (1998). *Against the odds: How "at-risk" students EXCEED expectations.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brewster, C., & Fager, J. (2000). *Increasing student engagement and motivation: From time-on-task to homework.* Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Available: *www.nwrel.org/request/oct00/textonly.html*

Websites

Check and Connect School Engagement Program— *www.ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect*

Parent Information Center— *www.parentinformationcenter.org*

National Dropout Prevention Center— *www.dropoutprevention.org*

Texas Education Agency Dropout Prevention Clearinghouse—*www.tea.state.tx.us/dpchse*

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